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ABSTRACT

Problems affecting the profession of college teaching are considered, along with the reasons for the persistence of faculty in academia. In some fields, practically no mobility remains today. Many faculty end up teaching at a college that they would not have chosen to attend. While teaching and research may focus on important national and world problems, few faculty have power to influence them. The same lack of individual influence prevails within the campus. During the 1970s and 1980s, higher education has stagnated. Liberal arts schools and the humanities have come under attack by the new emphasis on career training. Rewards, recognition, and status have been less frequent for faculty, and lagging salaries have undermined the reward system. Some departments are not hiring, and the full professor has no sense of apprenticing colleagues. Many part-time faculty are being used, with little compensation, recognition, and few benefits. Reasons for staying in the academic profession include the internal reward of intellectual pursuits, interest in teaching and students, and the relatively high public opinion of college teachers, who often are considered experts in their fields. Faculty members are free to express their ideas in class, to be eccentric, to have flexible work hours, and to enjoy a pleasant, park-like campus environment. (SW)

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**ACADEMIC TURBULENCE AND THE
CRISIS OF PROFESSIONAL SATISFACTION**

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Some reason exists to believe that the crisis of satisfaction in college teaching has now begun to lift, or soon will. If so, let this essay stand as a memento of an especially bleak era for higher education in America. I would not pretend that my perspectives are entirely divorced from the gnawing difficulties faced by the California State University system through more than fifteen years.

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JJB

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Over the past decade and a half, academe has changed, and by and large not for the better. Many of us wonder why we remain part of it. Problems endemic to the profession which the heady 1960s camouflaged have reappeared, while fresh adversities have emerged. Many faculty are experiencing a crisis of satisfaction. Yet most of us do stay, and for sound, though often half-recognized, reasons. After exploring the crisis itself, I will comment more cheerfully on why it is that the profession continues to hold us.

In the 1960s, overall college enrollment shot up by nearly half a million a year. A demand erupted for more professors, spurred by demographics and a Sputnik-induced fear (in the then-lingo of missilery) of a Ph.D. gap. Faculty salaries practically doubled, outpacing the cost of living and national wage levels. Teaching loads dropped. And as Richard D. Mandell has put it, "for a while some energetic professors had the job mobility that was more characteristic of oil-well drillers or actors." All this lofted professional morale. Even so, major obstacles to satisfaction remained. I wish to speculate just a bit about the underside of academe both then and now.

Jonathan L. Freedman has written that "while it may be admirable to have a desire to achieve something important, it can also be a source of frustration and unhappiness, since so few ever accomplish anything outstanding." In one sense, merely breaking into academe represents an important achievement. Yet many professors anticipate accomplishing truly great things once they have arrived. They would like to think of themselves as belonging to a meritocracy, whether it is one or not, and they expect to receive commensurate recognition, including affiliation with the "right" institution. But in some fields, practically no mobility remains today for anyone, however meritorious. Few of us, no matter where we teach, are very satisfied about where we teach. Though only ten or a dozen prime chairs may exist in one's field, posing extremely poor odds of securing one, if we fail to, many of us feel a keen sense of defeat. We suffer an evicted-from-paradise syndrome: most of us never get tenure at an institution as prestigious as the one where we did our graduate work. We commonly wind up spending thirty or forty years teaching at one or several colleges which we would never have chosen to attend. Our career, on reflection, seems disappointing.

We aspire, and fall short. Yet even if we do make a great success, who among us can compare ourselves to the true giants of our realm? What professor of English is not awed by Faulkner, what scientist by the Curies? Nor do we have all the answers. Most of us feel humbled by the awareness of how little we really know; often, of how little our disciplines know, whatever their pretensions. Unlike many people, we want to do unconventional things—we set what we like to think of as higher, and

therefore, hard-to-meet goals. Sometimes we find them difficult even to define. These aspirations can prove very risky where our own happiness and satisfaction are concerned. Our proudest achievements often ring hollow. Considering the labor these accomplishments demand of us, few compliments, few expressions of genuine appreciation, pass between colleagues in this profession. In some disciplines, back-biting seems on the rise.

Then too, there is the matter of powerlessness, or the perceived sense of it. Many of us focus our teaching and research around great, ongoing national or international problems. But Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski aside, few of us have the power to do very much about them. As some faculty see it, the same lack of individual influence prevails even within their own campuses.

We might label all these hazards and shortcomings academe's perennial downers. Despite some recent accentuations, in one way or another they have always clouded our profession. Now we turn to more distinctly contemporary troubles.

During the Seventies and early Eighties, higher education has stagnated. Some campuses have closed for good. Liberal arts schools, and the humanities in general, have come under siege by the new emphasis on career training. Public criticism of higher education has risen, at least until quite recently, while the university is expected to do more and more for society, including "remediating" its ill-educated offspring.

For the individual professor, rewards, recognition and status have become more precarious now than fifteen years ago because of this public criticism, and, for many, due as well to the flight of resources from the humanities and social sciences. This loss is commonly matched by a continuing inadequacy of resources even for the high-demand disciplines. Lagging salaries have likewise undermined the reward system. The full professor, in particular, is widely cited as a classic casualty of America's recent inflationary unpleasantness. The 1960s, in retrospect, comprised a brief, delightful interruption of a perennial financial condition. But since most of us remember that decade, it provides our standard of comparison. No question about it, under-compensation breeds frustration, especially when we see other people with similar levels of training doing so much better than ourselves. And in fact, professors have considerable need for income. We are expected to go to conventions, buy books, attend concerts and plays, and travel, not to mention providing our own children with a higher education.

Badly as economic conditions have deteriorated for tenured faculty, at least they have jobs; many who would eagerly join them do not. A number of fields (business, engineering, computer science) smother in students and recruit people to teach them. Yet the elemental cycle of renewal, maturity, and decline has virtually disappeared in other disciplines because as student demand has lagged, the next generation of professors has been aborted by the job market. It has become a lost generation. One no

longer expresses astonishment at hearing of an academic department which has not made a tenure-track hire in over a decade. This sort of thing leads to a sense of childlessness, of futurelessness. It also reallocates status among the disciplines, breeding anxiety and resentment in the liberal arts departments toward the emergent professional ones and calling into question the role of the liberal arts themselves. In a department whose members are aging together, unjoined by new hires, the latecomers have all passed forty. The last ones remain junior, in a relative sense, seemingly forever. Even as a full professor, one has no sense of apprenticing colleagues. Meantime, the talents of many jobless younger people go to waste; others' are only partially used. A huge new "class" of part-timers has emerged, with little compensation, little recognition, and few benefits. Many of these are women, for whom, when the profession opened, it also closed.

Why, then, do we stick with it? The failures and shortcomings of our profession, I suspect, are easier to gauge than its attractions and successes. In truth, most fields have not seen great numbers of faculty depart, while many people still try to break in. By and large they want to secure the intrinsic, perennial compensations which a professorship holds out. As rewards accrue less and less from the outside, it becomes correspondingly helpful to remind ourselves of these traditional compensations even as we work toward a broader renewal.

The first, and biggest, internal reward is the life of the mind.

The second is the students, and the act of teaching itself. Whether their SAT scores have declined or not, helping students develop, seeing results, and attracting occasional flashes of appreciation, provide reason enough to do what we do. (Ironically, though, the better we teach, the more students we have, and the harder it becomes to remain productive scholars. The profession rewards good scholarship but punishes good teaching.)

Then there are what former California Governor Jerry Brown, in a horrible term, designated the "psychic" rewards passed out by our profession. Much of what we do is simply fun. People in careers such as ours, with relatively high status, tend to feel more satisfied than others. And whatever else we may not enjoy about it, the profession does carry a certain degree of respect, even if probably less than before. The public regards academics as experts, and what we do, say, or write can have importance.

A professorship serves as an escape route from many of the burdens of the world. By and large, we do not get bossed. We carry no obligation to keep up with the Joneses; we have opted out of this, and everyone knows it. We are excused from the rat race. In exchange, we enjoy a good deal of freedom. We can say what we want in class. We suffer few social restrictions. We are free—even expected—to be eccentric. This includes the dreamlike freedom of absentmindedness. We even pos-

sess the freedom to repeat from the same deteriorating lecture notes year after year. And we have the freedom to behave arrogantly toward our students and toward one another. (Professional squabbling and competitive ego-measuring may be our ways of keeping up with the Joneses after all. Instead of taking on the outer community, we go after one another.) Enduring no nine-to-five grind, we maintain flexible hours. We may work sixty or more hours a week, but few of them are fixed, even during the day. We have summers, if we can afford to take them, and occasional—at some institutions, painfully occasional—sabbaticals. We thus have the freedom to contemplate life, or to spend time with our families; to do research and write, or to travel.

In its pleasant, park-like surroundings, the campus itself is a fine place to grow by getting to know the variety of people attracted to it. During recent years new kinds of students have revitalized many campuses—blacks, Latinos, Asians, returning men and women, and immigrants. With their diverse individuals and activities, some campuses have simply become more interesting places to be.

These, then, comprise some of the more important sources of satisfaction afforded by an academic career. Most of them are perennial rewards, intrinsic to the profession. They exist despite the timeless problems of academe and the abrupt decline of the 1970s. As for income, it, too, has moved back toward perennial patterns. Yet on the whole college professors do not seem a mercenary lot. This would not conform to our fashions and traditions. We chose the profession knowing its sacrifices as well as its rewards. Academe takes root in self-givingness. Dedication and service—our dedication and service—comprise its biggest subsidy. One last reason why professors seem remarkably patient may arise from the relationship between people's overall individual happiness and their income, which has been found to be limited.

All this may help to explain why, despite the crisis of satisfaction in our profession, as a group academics still seem surprisingly contented. Above us in personal happiness, according to one study, are only clergy, psychologists, and individuals who call themselves entertainers. In a way, we embody each of these three roles. The theme that joins them seems to be that they involve imparting something to other people. If so, then the professor who loves his or her discipline, who loves to teach, and, perhaps, who sees research and publication as another form of teaching, may be among the best-rewarded of us all. True enough, our profession has grown a little threadbare. Yet the fabric itself remains a remarkably durable academic tweed.